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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RIYADH 004914

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DHAHRAN SENDS
PARIS FOR ZEYA, LONDON FOR TSOU

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TAGS: PGOV PREL PINR PHUM SA

SUBJECT: SAUDI HEZBOLLAH FIGURE OFFERS A SLIGHTLY TOUGHER
LINE THAN OTHER SAUDI SHI'A

REF: A. RIYADH 3346

1B. RIYADH 3312

1C. 2005 RIYADH 9396

Classified by Consul General John Kincannon for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

11. (C) In a May 28 meeting with PolOff and PolFSN, Ahmed Al-Nimr (Ahmed), brother and office manager of Shi'a cleric Sheikh Hassan Al-Nimr (Hassan), explained that Hassan would not meet with American diplomats because "he would lose the respect of people on the street, who would ask why he met with the Americans." (Note: Post had sought a meeting with Hassan, whom contacts have described as a leading figure in Saudi Hezbollah and who first came to ConOffs attention after several news stories noted his participation and comments in King Abdullah's National Dialogue. Ahmed, whose number a contact had shared, initially said no, and then suggested the May 28 meeting to discuss the idea further. End note.)

12. (C) Elaborating, Ahmed divided the Shi'a community into three categories vis-a-vis their willingness to meet American diplomats: "First you have the lightweights, who have no importance in the community; of course they'll meet with you. Next are the political class, like Hassan Al-Saffar, Jafar Al-Shayeb, and the rest. Because they are political, they are happy to talk with you; I am sure you can call any of them up and arrange a meeting in five minutes. But they do not truly represent the Shi'a community. Finally, it is people like Sheikh Hassan al-Nimr, Ghalib Al-Hammad, and Sheikh Ali Al-Nasr, who represent the deep religious core of the Shi'a community. American policies make it impossible for them to meet with U.S. diplomats." (Note: Al-Hammad was recently appointed as the judge in Qatif's Shi'a court (ref C). Contrary to Ahmed's assertion, Hassan Al-Saffar has consistently refused ConOffs requests for meetings for a number of years. End note.)

13. (C) Ahmed mentioned four issues in particular that prevented Hassan from meeting American diplomats. He first contrasted Secretary Rice's call in Riyadh in June 2005 for the release of three jailed reformers with U.S. "silence" on the issue of nine Shi'a who, Ahmed claimed, have languished without trial in SAG prisons for six to ten years in connection with the Khobar Towers bombing. "Why doesn't the U.S. government speak out about their condition?" he asked. Next, he criticized the USG for not pressuring the SAG enough on reform: "People throughout Saudi Arabia, not just the Shi'a in the Eastern Province, have suffered under the Wahhabi regime and want change. If the U.S. were a true partner to the Saudi people, it would be calling publicly for reform." Finally, he alleged U.S. bias toward Israel and

pro-Sunni bias of Ambassador Khalilzad in Iraq as two other problems with U.S. foreign policy. PolOff observed that many Shi'a have raised similar concerns directly with American diplomats and asked why these issues were apparently more sensitive to Hassan than to other Shi'a. "If Sheikh Hassan meets with American diplomats, he might lose the respect of people on the street," Ahmed repeated, stressing that Hassan was "open-minded" and noting that he had met with German, Swiss, and Danish diplomats.

¶4. (C) Ahmed proceeded with an analysis of the political situation in Saudi Arabia not markedly different from what we have heard from other Shi'a interlocutors. He described Shi'a as "desiring peace" and Saudi Shi'a as desiring to be treated as full Saudi citizens without discrimination. However good King Abdullah's intentions, he noted, reform was moving "very, very, very slowly." The National Dialogue, in whose most recent session Hassan participated, was a welcome exercise, Ahmed continued, but "all its recommendations have been swept under the table unimplemented." He lamented the pressure that (Sunni) religious extremists put on all reformers and Saudi institutions, noting that September 11 was a "golden opportunity for dealing with them (the extremists), of which the government failed to take advantage." On the positive side, he acknowledged the increased cultural expression of the Shi'a community through regular forums and other institutions of civil society. Hassan's forum had been one of the earliest and most active, Ahmed said, until the SAG shut it down one year ago after Hassan chose "wiliyat al-faqih" as the discussion topic.

¶5. (C) Continuing on the theme of culture, Ahmed asked why Embassy Riyadh and ConGen Dhahran did not have cultural programs like the embassies in Beirut and Cairo. Referring

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approvingly to a recent visit by Noam Chomsky to Beirut (though not claiming it was an Embassy-sponsored program), Ahmed urged more cultural and intellectual dialogue between the U.S. and Saudi peoples. When PolOff began his account of the cultural activity undertaken by ConGen Dhahran over the past year by noting that PAO had recently spoken to a forum of 70 women in Al-Ahsa about our cultural programs (ref A), Ahmed almost choked with laughter on his drink of water. "You're so concerned with women, but you should first take care of the men," he opined. (Comment: PolOff took this reaction to indicate that Ahmed did not find programs with Saudi women to be serious programs. End comment.) Recovering himself, Ahmed suggested that post host a speaker on human rights, work corroboratively with Saudi Aramco to host a series of presentations on Aramco's history and cultural significance, and explore ways of supporting Shi'a charitable societies. He said that Hassan would consider attending cultural programs organized by ConGen Dhahran if they were held at neutral locations.

Comment

¶6. (C) This conversation was PolOff's first with someone who clearly represents Saudi Hezbollah. As expressed above, one noteworthy point is that most of Ahmed's positions seemed remarkably similar to those of many of our other Shi'a interlocutors. Differences in content, where present, were ones of degree and not kind: Ahmed tacked a few more "very's" on to the "reform is going very slowly" mantra, for example, and was more direct in his criticism of the U.S. for not urging due process for the Khobar Towers detainees. His political and cultural points of reference, however, were markedly different. He referred once to Hassan Nasrallah and Mohammed Khatami (in reference to similar remarks each made on Lebanon's diversity); once to (Lebanese) Hezbollah (as an example of Shi'a cultural commitment to community services); and, as mentioned above, to Noam Chomsky (who, according to press reports, met with Nasrallah in Beirut in May).

¶7. (C) As noted in ref B, the nature of and extent of support for Saudi Hezbollah remain open questions. Despite Ahmed's contrast between "politicians" like Jafar Al-Shayeb and figures like Hassan, who "represent the deep religious core" of the Saudi Shi'a, Ahmed's instincts were clearly political: several comments indicated that he closely followed local, regional, and U.S. politics. His ultimate justification for Hassan's refusal to meet with U.S. diplomats was also political, namely that "people in the street" might lose respect for Hassan's commitment to his ideals. Ahmed's willingness to meet with PolOff and PolFSN also indicates that Saudi Hezbollah's views toward the USG are not so extreme as to rule out interaction. Indeed, his last question to PolOff, who had earlier offered the International Visitor Leadership Program as one example of how Mission Saudi Arabia was promoting cultural exchange between Saudis and Americans, was, "So can you tell me more about this cultural visits program?" End comment.

(APPROVED: KINCANNON)
OBERWETTER